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ABSTRACT

The National Commission on Excellence in Education has challenged educators across the nation to drastically change the course of education during the 1980s. While rural educators share the desire to provide excellence in education, the Commission and the United States Department of Education must recognize the unique characteristics of rural schools and provide appropriately different strategies to enable rural schools to meet the new goals. Rural educators urge national policy makers to recognize diverse rural subcultures, support innovative teacher training programs, develop career ladder and merit pay systems designed to retain quality rural personnel, support more comprehensive inservice training programs, support intermediate educational units, and provide adequate rural special education services support. Problems for rural schools include insufficient funding and inadequate specialists to provide higher level basics, foreign languages, and advanced placement classes recommended as graduation requirements by the Commission. To strengthen programs, rural schools should consider senior student schedules, non-academic programs, classroom time on task, traveling teachers, and community participation. To support rural school reform, policymakers should address recruitment, support, and retention of rural teachers by providing flexible certification requirements, career ladder and merit pay programs, and adequate university teacher training programs. (NEC)

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RURAL EDUCATION

Mini Review, 1984

EXCELLENCE IN RURAL EDUCATION: "A NATION AT RISK" REVISITED

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September, 1984

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Excellence in Rural Education: "A Nation at Risk" Revisited

According to a report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, America is "a nation at risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). Its educational system is allowing a significant number of students to pass through its schools, receive high school diplomas, and enter higher institutions of learning without acquiring the base of knowledge and information, or the required skills, necessary to function in either a work or a higher learning environment. The Commission challenges the educational system to implement corrective action now. What does the Commission recommend? What impact do the recommendations have on rural schools? How can rural schools meet the challenge?

What Is "The Imperative for Educational Reform"?

Educators across the nation are being challenged to drastically change the course of education during the 1980s. To those long concerned that the quality of education has deteriorated in our schools, the time is ripe for significant improvements that will enhance the future of those in school. This unprecedented crusade to improve American schooling follows on the heels of a number of recent reports from individuals, committees, and commissions that point to a decline in the achievement of high school students. These reports outline specific changes that need to be made to overcome weaknesses of the educational system.

"A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983) highlights the shortcomings of America's educational programs. The startling statistics presented in this report illustrate the need for substantial changes in American education if the nation's school children are to become productive and successful citizens. To meet this need, 36 states have initiated curriculum reforms designed to improve and upgrade academic offerings in the schools, while 40 states plan to raise high school graduation requirements. In a related development, some dozen states are recommending new standards for increasing the pay for teachers. Such reforms have prompted Terrel Bell, U.S. Secretary of Education, to remark, "There is currently in progress the greatest, most far-reaching and, I believe, the most promising reform and renewal of education we have seen since the turn of the century" (McGrath 1983).

What Does the National Commission on Excellence Recommend?

The work of the Commission set forth a number of recommendations which addressed the span of education from strengthening high school graduation requirements to raising requirements for college and university admissions. Concomitant with reforms in student performance, requirements were recommended for reforms in instructional quality which highlighted improvement in teacher education and development of career levels for teachers.

Recommendations for substantial changes in high school graduation requirements will have considerable impact on school district resources. The following curriculum for grades 9 through 12 were recommended for completion prior to granting a high school diploma:

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- English--4 years.
- Mathematics--3 years.
- Science--3 years.
- Social Studies--3 years.
- Computer Science--1/2 year.

The Commission's recommendations emphasizing the first four subjects listed above do not require that new subject content be added to the curriculum. Rather, they emphasize an increase in the number of years offered and required.

An increasing number of institutions of higher education are already raising entrance requirements, and the high schools must follow suit if their graduates are to be eligible for college admission,. For example, an additional two years of foreign language for college-bound students is encouraged by the Commission. This recommendation, already a requirement in some states, may soon be a basic element of the curriculum of all college-bound students. Many colleges now stress that some secondary school experience with a foreign language be reflected on the high school transcript.

The inclusion of computer science as one of the "five new basics" adds a new requirement to school programs. The importance of this new technology has been noted by other groups as well. The Rural Education Association has adopted a similar position statement (Rural Education Association National Conference 1983):

> The REA encourages rural schools to review their high school graduation requirements and course offerings with the aim of strengthening the requirements and curriculum in English, mathematics, science, social studies, computer science and foreign language.

As an example of state-level response to the challenges in "A Nation at Risk," Utah's Education Reform Committee recommended adoption of a curriculum philosophy "which places greater emphasis on the basics of reading, writing, mathematics, literature, science (including computer science), history and social studies" (Utah State Steering Committee 1983).

These favorable responses, not only to the Commission's recommendations in general but to its specific inclusion of new subject matter as well, are a reflection of the sincere dedication of all professional educators to the task of preparing students to meet the demands of a complex and changing world. Favorable as they are, however, these recommendations neither specify a minimum amount of credits or years to be studied for each subject nor consider the plight of many rural school districts which lack the financial base to implement an expanded curriculum.

How Do Rural Educators View the Report?

Some educators feel that the Commission's recommendations are worthy goals but overlook some important considerations. Roy Brubacher, Assistant Commissioner of the Colorado Department of Education and past president of the Rural Education Association, reported that the data gathered for the report were specifically directed towards problems occurring in urban schools and failed to consider the unique problems that exist in the rural environment.

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Brubacher also expressed disappointment that rural excellence was overlooked (Brubacher 1983).

The American Council on Rural Special Education expressed support of the report's intent but requested that the Commission and the U.S. Department of Education recognize the differences between rural and non-rural schools and provide for appropriately different strategies for implementing the recommendations (American Council on Rural Special Education 1983). In particular, the Council suggested that policy makers:

- o Recognize the diverse rural subcultures.
- o Support innovative teacher training programs that address areas of critical need in rural areas (e.g., rural itinerant teachers for training of the visually impaired).
- o Develop career ladder and merit pay systems designed to retain quality rural personnel.
- o Support more comprehensive inservice training programs.
- o Support intermediate educational units.
- o Provide more adequate support for rural special education services.

Surprisingly, a number of rural educators have indicated that their graduation requirements are already close to those recommended in "A Nation at

Risk." Brubacher cited a recent survey of high school graduation requirements in Colorado which revealed that 90 percent of the rural high schools in that state currently require four years of English, three years of mathematics, and three years of science (Brubacher 1983). Two larger-county superintendents in Nebraska also indicated that their course offerings as well as those of many of the rural school districts in the state equal the Commission's recommendations (Ivan Muse 1984). Notable exceptions, however, were lack of computer science and foreign language study in these districts.

At the Third Annual New Mexico Rural Education Conference held in 1983 in Las Cruces, educators in attendance were asked to complete a survey expressing their feeling about "A Nation at Risk" and its impact upon rural schools (Muse 1983). The school superintendents present were generally very familiar with the report and recommended adoption of its recommendations with some changes. In every instance the school district either required or offered as electives sufficient courses to equal or exceed the Commission's recommendations in the areas of English, mathematics, science, and social studies. English was most often a 4-year requirement with the other subjects usually being required for only two years each. The superintendents expressed some concern that increasing the requirements would limit student opportunity to enroll in other courses. They felt that imposing these additional requirements would have a limiting effect on those students enrolling in vocational-technical areas as preparation for the world of work after graduation.

Also of interest was the number of schools that offered computer science and foreign language. Most superintendents reported that their schools had some computer science offerings but only on an elective basis. Foreign language courses were primarily elective. In this subject area

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superintendents expressed concern about securing well-qualified teachers and keeping them long enough to establish continuous programs.

A rural school district in Arizona reported that it was only one credit short of what was proposed by the Commission. This district currently requires only two and one-half years of mathematics instead of three. Although computer science is offered on an elective basis, 70 percent of the students take computer science during high school. The school district attempted to offer foreign language as a graduation requirement, but the plan was opposed by parents and was subsequently dropped from consideration.

What Are the Problems for Rural Schools?

A school's list of graduation requirements does not address quality of offerings, outcomes, or general program problems. Rural communities allocate sizeable percentages of their local resources for education; yet their low tax bases limit the necessary funds for securing and retaining qualified teachers and support staff. Shortage of funds, among other factors, reduces the number of specialty courses (higher-level basics, advanced-placement classes, foreign languages, etc.) that can be offered and the materials and equipment, particularly in the computer area, that can be purchased.

In California, where funding looms as a major deterrent to school reform, educators feel that a significant improvement in financial aid is needed before meaningful changes can be realized (Ivan Muse 1984). A number of high schools in this state have had to reduce the number of class periods in the school day from six to five because of lack of school monies. If the Commission's report were adopted, virtually all available classroom periods

would be utilized in completing the basics. Thus, the opportunity for students to take electives would be severely reduced and many non-basic courses would be dropped from course offerings. One educator noted that raising standards and calling for changes is not productive unless the severe difficulties that school districts have just trying to stay solvent are addressed.

Serious staffing inadequacies in rural schools are particulary relevant to the Commission's report. To maintain the necessary courses needed for appropriate education experiences, small rural schools must hire a sufficient number of teachers to handle the basic subjects--regardless of student population count. This results in small class sizes and a relatively large outlay of school budget for teacher salaries. School personnel are concerned that the addition of more required classes would result in insufficient class sizes in some courses coupled with the need to hire additional teachers out of very limited and firmly set school budgets. Obviously, adding more required courses will reduce the number of students who are able to participate in elective programs. One state official reported that since its universities have begun to stress higher academic standards for admissions and since the "Nation at Risk" report has been publicized, a 20 percent reduction in vocational-technical education enrollment has been noted in the public schools of that state (Ivan Muse 1984).

Developing and maintaining foreign language programs of adequate quality is a continuing problem for rural schools. Rural school personnel must consider what foreign language should be offered, what enrollment levels justify including more than one year of study, and where a teacher may be found who will be satisfied teaching only one or two periods of the language

as well as two or three other subjects not in their major. Finally, securing a well-qualified teacher is only half the battle. If that teacher leaves after a year or two, finding a replacement to keep the program going is a challenge often not met.

At the present time nearly every school in the nation has a computer somewhere in the school building. One small rural school in Utah has a thriving computer program in its business classes (Utah Small Schools Association 1983). The business teacher reported that he was totally self-taught and made many mistakes before he understood how the computer should be used as an instructional device. However, only students enrolled in business courses receive computer training.

A recent survey of all the school districts in the nation revealed that 80 percent of the 2,000 largest, most financially capable schools used computers for classroom instruction while only 40 percent of the smaller poorer high schools did ("Schools with Computers" 1983). Too often the small rural high school with one computer places the instrument in the principal's office or in a specific classroom where mathematics, business, or science is taught. The rural teacher with some computer skills is often not prepared, nor has enough computers, to teach computer literacy to all students. If computer science were established as a graduation requirement, hiring a computer specialist teacher would create similar staffing and financial problems to that of foreign languages. In addition, the costs for adding computers and good educational software can be a serious drain on school district resources. Unlike urban schools, rural schools generally lack any type of private sector support for obtaining expensive supplies. The typical corporate computer donation programs tend to favor urban areas with high

visibility. In a number of rural schools, a few computers are present but are often not being fully utilized because software is too expensive to purchase.

What Can Rural Schools Do to Strengthen Their Programs?

A number of rural school superintendents suggest that substantial changes can be made by careful study of current academic offerings, teacher assignments, and student participation in school programs (Muse 1983). These educators suggest that schools look at the following factors to identify problems and potential solutions:

--senior student schedules
--non-academic programs
--classroom time on task
--traveling teachers
--community participation

It is not uncommon to find senior students attending all elective classes with no basic subjects being taken. The reason for this is simple: minimum graduation credits permit students to take most hard basic subjects by the end of the junior year (11th grade) of high school. This situation is being changed by adding to the number of units required for graduation or by requiring that a minimum number of basic subjects be taken during the senior year.

Teachers in rural schools are often concerned that the balance between academic course work and extracurricular programs, such as athletic programs and social activities, has tipped heavily toward non-academic programs. In

the small rural school too many students are involved in an inordinate number of non-academic events. Often these students will have excessive absences from basic academic courses, or will enroll in easier courses in order to pass with higher grades and maintain an acceptable grade-point average for college admission. Educators need to consider limiting the number of activities occurring in the school and/or providing counseling to students who tend to neglect studies.

Findings regarding the amount of time that students spend in actual class work are also disturbing (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). The typical school day in the United States is six hours in length. It is not uncommon to find schools, however, in which the available class instructional time (six periods a day times 50 minutes per period = 300 minutes) is diminished by half. Classroom interferences may be many, and in the rural school the demand upon the fewer students to participate in multiple activities (band, chorus, drama, yearbook, cheerleading, sports, etc.) causes frequent class absences. This also creates a perception that participating in non-academic activities takes precedence over doing well in academic subjects. To correct this, teachers can be trained to improve their instructional strategies so that more of the class period is devoted to direct subject matter study and effort. Also, a number of schools are requiring that more of the non-academic activities occur after school hours.

The traveling teacher plan has been used successfully by a number of school districts with small schools widely scattered throughout the district. Specialists in mathematics, computer science, foreign language, reading, etc. can be hired to teach at a number of schools during the week. These teachers

travel on schedule from school to school. It is also possible for districts to share teacher specialization on a cooperative basis. Limitations to this plan include traveling teacher "burn out," the large distances to be traveled, the expense of financing extra travel, and provision for teacher incentive.

Another alternative to examine in attempting to improve education offerings in rural schools is community participation. Patrons living near a school often have specific skills (computer ability, knowledge of a foreign language, etc.) that could be used to support teacher efforts. There is also a need for sharing of facilities and teachers not only among schools but between schools and colleges as well. The Washington School District in southern Utah shares facilities with the local junior college, for example (Utah Small Schools Assoication 1983). The college also provides instructors to assist in the teaching of advanced courses for gifted and talented students when enrollments are too small to justify offering such classes in the high school. In some other states rural seniors may attend local colleges for part of their high school units. College classes may be attended by high school students during the day or at night. Sometimes colleges offer such classes as part of an extension program to a community located away from a college town.

What Can Policy Makers Do to Support Rural School Reform?

The state department of education in each state must play a leadership role in supporting reform in rural schools. While it is apparent that rural schools are relatively close to the Commission's recommendations for increasing standards in the basic subjects, the added changes create substantial hurdles to overcome. The state department can determine the needs of the rural schools by conducting and coordinating studies that seek to

determine strengths and weaknesses in present programs. Policy recommendations must allow for the differences between urban and rural schools as well as for the diversity among rural schools within each state.

In addition, regional service centers or agencies are aware of the needs of local schools. With adequate personnel, they can provide inservice training to teachers as well as supply specialists and services to isolated schools. These centers are also able, with sufficient funds, to purchase computers and computer software in quantity at reduced costs and thus pass savings along to the school districts.

Providing adequate inservice training to rural personnel is essential. Relatively higher personnel turnover rates, low budgets for inservice training in most rural districts, and traveling distances to urban-held workshops are obstacles to providing inservice training to rural teachers. It can be done, however. A few states (notably Oregon, Utah, New Mexico, and Iowa) provide rural workshops that are designed to help rural educators gain new knowledge and skills in teaching.

Policy makers must address the basic needs of rural schools regarding recruitment, support, and retention of qualified staff. In particular, rural schools can be better supported by considering the following:

- Flexible certification requirements could place capable teachers in a rural setting without excessive university or state department of education road blocks. Unique certification policies need to be established that permit districts to hire qualified individuals who may not meet the expected standards at a particular time.

- Career ladders and merit pay programs are promising systems for rewarding all teachers but presently tend to be developed only within school districts with large teaching staffs and more favorable funding possibilities. These plans should be extended to rural schools with few staff members and fewer funding opportunities.

- University teacher training programs across the country have not adequately prepared educators for teaching in rural settings. They also have not offered encouraging opportunities for their prospective teachers to train in rural schools. In most instances, even those universities in high rural impact areas do not prepare prospective rural teachers any differently from prospective urban teachers although the teacher turnover rate in rural America is far above that in the cities. More research into rural education is needed, along with increased attention to university preparation of teachers for rural schools.

If the Commission's recommendations are to be implemented by rural schools, it is essential that the Commission and the U.S. Department of Education recognize the unique characterisitics of rural schools and provide appropriately different strategies to enable rural schools to meet these goals. Rural schools are different in many respects from non-rural schools, but rural and urban educators and communities alike share the desire to provide excellence in education so that their youth can meet the demands of a complex and changing world.

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